Murdoch and the far-right

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[Theme music]

ELIZABETH:

From Schwartz Media. I'm Elizabeth Kulas. This is *7am*.
For the first time ever, individual articles in the media can be linked to far-right recruitment drives. High on the list is reporting from *The Australian*, in pieces about Safe Schools and others about race. Rick Morton on responsibility and self-reflection in an industry that's historically bad at both.
[Theme ends]

ELIZABETH:

So Rick can you describe the reporting on the Safe Schools program as it happened at *The Australian*?

RICK:

Yeah of course. *The Australian* has one particular knack in the media landscape and that's to latch onto an issue that might have been reported somewhere else. And it was the case with safe schools. There was a *Herald Sun* article and Miranda Devine column in *The Daily Telegraph* that first kind of alerted people to this program.
And the editor in chief at the time of *The Australian*, Paul Whittaker saw that article and decided that it was something that animated him. He was not happy about it. And then he kind of put reporters at *The Australian* onto that issue.

ELIZABETH:

Rick Morton is a writer and journalist. He recently wrote about far right groups for *The Saturday Paper*.

RICK:

You've got the editor in chief which is very command and control structure. If they decide they like something - they make it known. And there are journos who decide that

if they want to be on the front page, then those are the kind of stories they should write. That happened with safe schools. It was a combination of the two kind of coming together in a perfect storm. I was actually in the Melbourne bureau of *The Australian* in 2016 as a journalist when this campaign kicked off.
You know the one thing about *The Australian*, whatever you may think of it, if it decides to campaign on something, it throws the entire weight of all its resources at that issue. And that happened with safe schools and we kind of saw that by the end product, I mean by September 2017 they had written 90,000 words. Most of the coverage, almost to a tee, was critical, because that was what got it in the news. And it also made our readers very animated. And so you get this perfect feedback loop then, of stories generating comment, generating outrage among the readers from *The Australian*, and then more stories piling on top of that. And it kind of builds its narrative that's incredibly warped and doesn't reflect the real world at all until it reaches a saturation point.

Archival tape — Unidentified Man 1:

"We've got a tape of masturbation classes in a government school in Victoria for students as young as 13, party of the wacky safe schools-type agenda…"

Archival tape — Unidentified Woman:

"It's promoted as the solution to schoolyard bullying and discrimination but its critics, and there are many, warn it's actually pushing an extreme left wing ideology."

Archival tape — Unidentified Man 2:

"A meeting of coalition MPs has ordered a review, an investigation into the so called safe schools coalition program."

Archival tape — Unidentified Man 3:

"Some of the things the safe schools coalition Australia are recommending to school students include pornographic web content, sex shops, adult online communities, and sex clubs…"

RICK:

And this is where the Oz is effective, over time other organisations start to pay attention. Commercial TV networks will start picking up these stories. The *Herald Sun* will be forced into covering it again and so they jump back on board, then *The Age*... and so now it becomes a real thing. And that's what leads to this penetration into the real world and real people can tell you what Safe Schools is or at least their very distorted view of it based on two sentences they might have heard here and there.

Archival tape — Unidentified Woman:

"Will you please make safe schools a non compulsory opt in or opt out program, thereby allowing parents to choose for themselves what they consider best for their children. [applause]"

ELIZABETH:

And Rick before we get any further what is safe schools?

RICK:

It's an anti-bullying program for queer kids. In recognition of the fact that you know if you're a kid from an Asian background or from a Lebanese background and you get bullied based on race, there are particular ways that you need to handle that. And the same thing applies to other minority groups. We didn't have something like that specifically for queer kids.

Now the problem with Safe Schools as *The Australian* saw it was that it went too far and they were trying to teach kids all these different things and most of that reporting just wasn't true. But it didn't matter after the narrative took off. And so this perfectly noble, fine program that had existed for a couple of years I think before anyone thought to write about it, that had done no harm and suddenly became a lightning rod for all that was wrong with society.

ELIZABETH:

What are the outcomes of a campaign like this, that's run by a newspaper like *The Australian*?

RICK:

Well I mean safe schools as far as I know has been axed. And the real kind of test of what happens at the end of these campaigns… I mean newspapers call it scalping right. You've got to scalp. The program itself was considered persona non grata. Politicians, even sympathetic politicians, the Daniel Andrews government, tried to back it as much as they could for example. But the pressure - the public pressure - was so great that everyone sort of crab walks away from it now. So you can't even get friendly people on board. It's too hot to touch. And so it's really set back the idea of having a particular anti-bullying program for queer kids in schools, it set it back a decade at least because there is poison all around the issue now. I thought safe schools crossed a line because we weren't dealing with intellectual debates anymore we were dealing with people's lives. And I think when you go to attacking somebody's identity it is actually who they are then you start kind of laying the groundwork for these broader narratives about how these people are not equal and not worthy.

ELIZABETH:

You've written on this new research that's been done by Victoria University into how material like what's happened with the Safe Schools program is shared by far right groups and picked up by far right groups online.

RICK:

Yeah so through the foremost experts in far right extremism in Australia: Dr Deborah Smith, Dr Mario Puka and Mohammad Iqbal at Victoria University. They've got this research which hasn't been published yet but I've been appraised of it. And essentially what they did was they decided to follow the largest 12 Facebook groups of far right extremists in Victoria. And they've studied from the moment those groups established

their footprint online, every post that was made by the administrators. Every comment that was made by the members of these groups, how many people sign up to these groups and the study found that there were 600,000 unique individuals who had joined these 12 Facebook groups. These researchers decided to look at what is actually driving these people what is it that they respond to in public discourse. Are they responding to stuff that we would consider mainstream? And what does that mean for how they organise themselves? It's actually the first time this kind of research has been done in Australia and it's the first time we've had empirical evidence between the links from media to far right groups in the world.

And one of the things that I was immediately drawn to was the breakdown of the biggest content links shared on these twelve groups. In terms of the top four. Number one is the *Daily Mail* and they're the largest English speaking newspaper in the world. So you can kind of understand that, they're not behind a paywall and they're kind of conservative and right wing particularly on immigrant issues. And so in number two you've got Channel Nine, which is their digital websites before they merge with Fairfax newspapers. So this is going back two to three years when the study was conducted. Then you've got YouTube which is one of the biggest media organisations in the world and also very well used by neo-Nazi groups and far right groups to peddle their wares. And then you've got *The Australian* which is behind a paywall and has an audience size many orders of magnitude smaller than those first three and that's stood out immediately to me because I know that they're not going there to get angry at the content in *The Australian*, they're sharing it because it backs up their world view.

ELIZABETH:

And what did they find was being shared?

RICK:

so they've got these three kind of core mobilising themes around which they can with their supporters into a frenzy: nationalistic and patriotism type themes at number one, government in politics because government politics is always broken - obviously. And number three is Islam.

[Music starts]

They're the three main things. But then they've got secondary themes around which they can turn on a dime. And so when safe schools popped up out of nowhere - as it did - gender fluidity and words about gender, particularly transgender, started appearing in these far right groups or they increased in their proportion. The word transgender went up sixteen hundred per cent in the two years. You could actually map this major news event to this increased chatter in the far right groups.

ELIZABETH:

We'll be right back.

[Music ends]

[Advertisement]

ELIZABETH:

Ordinarily when we'd think of a far right group we might think of it being defined by views of racial superiority. But as you've pointed out Safe Schools figured prominently in material that was shared online and on social media by far right groups. How does that figure into kind of the far right ideology that usually focuses on race?

RICK:

Yeah. So I had a really good chat to Deborah Smith about this. In their research they actually broke down the far right groups. There are cultural superiority groups like True Blue Crew. And then there are racial superiority groups. And the key difference between cultural and racial is one is anti-democratic and one thinks that we can make the world better using the same institutions, it's just that they've been overrun by lefties. But what happens is that for a few years they were all very happy going along animating all of their followers by going hard against Muslims. And that's one of their main priorities. They think Muslims and Islamic people represent everything that's coming to attack them.

But really the underlying narrative is not about Islam. It's about the fact that they are, almost universally, straight white men who feel like the old world order is ending and anyone they can paint as an enemy, is the enemy. And so gender fluidity is a threat to the family unit, in their eyes. It doesn't necessarily appear to be intuitive at first but when you think about it, it goes into all of the arguments they make. It's a fad cooked up by left wing ideology, which goes to political correctness, which means I can't talk about the things I think really matter, which goes to defective government and political institutions, and the fact that they have been overrun by the left and these people ought to be stopped now, because if they are allowed to continue then these straight white men will have no power. The one thing they feel is entitled to power, because they've always been told they are powerful. And so I think these people are animated by this insecurity and are looking for threats everywhere they turn.

ELIZABETH:

And arguably they're also bonding over the idea that they’re being marginalised because they're straight and they’re men. And that brings sex and gender into the conversation.

RICK:

Correct. And it's actually easier for them to latch on to LGBTQI queer issues because there are symbols: there’s the rainbow flag, there was the same sex marriage survey. In terms of feminism, it's much more kind of amorphous and it's very hard for them to latch onto an institution that kind of stands for feminism. I mean those things threaten their power. There’s this great quote — and I'm gonna I'm gonna butcher it — but if you've never been oppressed and things start to equalise that may feel a lot like oppression to you because suddenly other people are getting the power they should have had all along.

ELIZABETH:

Rick did the study rank secondary themes for what preoccupied in these groups?

RICK:

It actually did it pointed out the facts like when their main narrative is kind of on the back burner, they can turn quite quickly onto secondary mobilisation themes. And so you've got things like crime and violence, and you've got Anzac and military, another big patriotic nationalistic kind of thing, gender - which is what we saw pop up with safe schools - and then immigration and multiculturalism. Anything that threatens their way of life or that they think is corrupting the social order, they can spin into a narrative that works for them.

ELIZABETH:

What's the impact do you think of the provocative and biased news coverage that's being shared in these groups online?

RICK:

When you start to lay the groundwork for this kind of unpicking of the social fabric. It emboldens these people to kind of carry on with their rhetoric of division and eventually does lead to violence. You know, there are kind of three steps: there's the civilising discourse in the mainstream media, which kind of makes these topics more palatable to far right groups and the like oh look see it gives us credibility.

And then you've got the far right groups themselves, who consider themselves kind of at the vanguard of this big culture war. You know, they think they are the brave warriors on the frontline. And then you've got people within those groups who think, this isn't happening quick enough. If I go out now and act alone and do something big and bold I could start the revolution tomorrow. You can't control that, right? Once you've let those terms out of the gate in the mainstream press, then you've got a slippery slide all the way down to violence. Now you can't draw a straight line, but what you can do is point to the environment and go: 'you have created an incubator for these ideas and then nobody has control over what happens next'.

ELIZABETH:

And in fact this study is able to empirically draw a line between the coverage and some of the recruitment drives that happen within these groups by tracking the language that's used online within them.

RICK:

Correct. So I mean what we can say without a shadow of a doubt is that far right groups respond specifically to certain campaigns in the mainstream media and they use them strategically - and that's the word Deborah Smith used when she spoke to me - to recruit people. To get people who may have been on the fence going 'you know what, I've got a bit of right wing leaning maybe I think this is all true but I can't come out and say it yet because I would be judged'. It gives people like that a reason to jump on board.

It's very basic physics, I mean if you take friction out of the equation, acceleration is easier. So essentially you're taking away the obstacles, things that might have stood in the way of violence - and language in my view is violence - and you're taking away the gravel under the tires and you're saying go faster. You've got it in the paper that everyone reads. You've heard on the commercial breakfast television. It's like there is no friction at all. It's very hard to stop that stuff once it starts gathering momentum. Again, another principle of physics.

ELIZABETH:

And Rick do you think that journalists are aware of the impact that their work can have and the responsibility that they, that they have?

[Music starts]

RICK:

You'd think people who work with words would actually be more aware of the power they have. And it's funny because I think far right extremists actually know more about how to use language than a lot of journalists do because they think about this stuff they know how can mobilise people. I think a lot of journalists don't give it a second thought. And they do that because if they did then you know every story becomes harder to write and then you've got to think about how to phrase this and how to phrase that and it's just not the kind of industry that rewards self reflection.

ELIZABETH:

Rick, thank you.

RICK:

Thank you so much.

[Music ends]

[Advertisement]

[Theme music]

ELIZABETH:

Elsewhere in the news:

Disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein has been found dead in a New York jail. Epstein was in prison without bail after being charged with trafficking underaged girls. The case had received significant attention because of Epstein's powerful network of friends, and for the apparent impunity he had enjoyed for decades.

And trade minister Simon Birmingham has added to the criticism of Andrew Hastie over comments the latter published comparing China's rise to that of Nazi Germany. Birmingham is the second Liberal minister to criticise Hastie, asking colleagues to

reflect on whether opinions they may hold are necessary or helpful to the national interest.

This is *7am*. I'm Elizabeth Kulas. See you Tuesday.
[Theme ends]

For the first time ever, individual articles in the media can be linked to far-right recruitment drives. High on the list is reporting from *The Australian*, in stories about Safe Schools as well as about race. Rick Morton on responsibility and self-reflection in an industry historically bad at both.

Guest: Writer and author Rick Morton.

Background reading:

Murdoch media fuels far-right recruitment in *The Saturday Paper*
The Saturday Paper
The Monthly
Correction: This episode has been edited to remove a reference to penis tucking as a "key line" of *The Australian*'s reporting of Safe Schools. Further, the reporting of Safe Schools by *The Australian* included comment and editorials and *7am* did not intend to imply that it was the work of a single reporter.

7am is hosted by Elizabeth Kulas. The show is produced by Emile Klein, Ruby Schwartz and Atticus Bastow. Our editor is Erik Jensen. Our theme music is by Ned Beckley and Josh Hogan of Envelope Audio.

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